CHRISTIANITY AND WAR.

A Sermon

BY THE

REV. G. OSWALD BAINTON

Preached at Streatham Hill Congregational Church,
On Sunday Evening, August 16th, 1914.

The Profit derived from the Sale of this Sermon will be given to the Red Cross Society.

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"Blessed be the Lord my strength, which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight."—Psalm cxliv 1.

"Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."—Isaiah ii. 4.

It is a great theme—in some ways a highly controversial one. But let us avoid the controversial issues to-night. We English are at war, we who hate war and love peace, and not a minister of religion, so far as we know, has lifted his voice against the course upon which we are engaged. The fact is, Christian men are saying everywhere, "It was inevitable. It was forced upon us. We could do no other. This thing had to be."

There is no uneasiness at the nation's heart as to the justice of our cause. Folly and pride, we know, brought on this war; but the folly and pride were not ours. It is, therefore, no blasphemy when Christian Englishmen lift pleading hearts to heaven and pray, "God defend the right."

But this larger question presents itself—Christianity and war. What shall we say of war, we who are followers of the Prince of Peace? Is it ever Christian? Is it ever right? So many people cannot say. They return a divided answer. Yet a Christian man should have no indecision with regard to the matter. There are those who say war is wrong. No matter what happens, war is a crime. The resort to arms should never be.

Count Tolstoi is representative of that school of thought. His disciples are not few, nor are they always fanatic. Their argument is that war is anti-human, anti-Christian, and unnecessary. They hold that a standing army is a libel on our civilisation, that a navy is a stain upon our seas.

So Tolstoi and his school interpret Christianity. Are they right? Is this the correct interpretation? If it is, we ought to know it. If we know it, we ought to say so. In any case, Christianity should speak with no hesitant voice. If Tolstoi is wrong, it must be said so. If he is right, it simply means that no true Christian could ever engage in military service.

What says the New Testament? Well, according to the four Gospels, Jesus never made use of force in His dealing with men. He never struck a man. He never resisted the violence of those who struck at Him. There is only one instance of reprisals in the whole Gospel story. It is where He cleansed the temple. St. John tells how Jesus made a scourge of cords to cast all out of the temple, both the sheep and oxen. Note the words used. They tell us how Jesus took a few slender rushes lying on the ground and twisted them into a whip in order that He might drive the cattle from the holy place. Possibly He struck an animal. That He struck a man is, as Chas. Jefferson says, a reckless guess of the biassed imagination.

What was the use of striking the poor, mercenary wretches who had made the Father's house a den of thieves? Why, they slunk away, cowed by the wrath of those burning eyes! It was by no whip Christ cleansed the temple; it was by sheer moral power. Right through the Scriptures there is not one shred of evidence to show that Jesus ever used an ounce of force to carry out His plans.

But you may have heard this story quoted as an argument for war. It is no argument. The whole thing reveals how exceeding scanty the materials from which an argument for war can be adduced from the Gospels.

When Jesus sent His disciples forth, He said they should go as lambs among wolves. Lambs do not fight. Wolves fight. Lambs cannot even protect themselves. "Be ye harmless as doves." "Master, we shall be killed!" "Be not afraid of them that kill the body," He replied. "Fear no one but God." And He everywhere deprecated the use of force. He forbade it the disciples. Even the love-apostle wanted once to fire some Samaritan villages that bore not the good Samaritan's name, and Jesus said, "Ah, you know not what spirit you are of!"

Impetuous Peter once took matters into his own hands. He drew a sword and did some mischief with it, and his Master said: "All they that take the sword shall perish by the sword. Put up thy sword."

Never a word anywhere to lend sanction to force.

"Resist not evil. . . . Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. . . . Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you."

Did He not say, though, "I came not to send peace on earth, but a sword"? Yes, He said that. But do

not forget how He goes on immediately to explain what He meant by it. That word "sword"—it means separation, contention, strife. But in the family; that is to happen in the home. "I came to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes shall be they of his own household."

That is no argument for war! and in all the Gospels you will not find one, therefore it is not difficult to see how one can read the New Testament and come out, quite honestly, where Tolstoi arrives.

Yet, after all, such a method of dealing with the records is unfair. What book is there so easily misread as the Bible? Men bolstered up slavery in the days of the American Civil War with abundant Old Testament defences. You can find arguments in the New Testament against marriage and wealth and learning, and a dozen other things we know to be right.

Fact is, we must read our Bible sanely, in broader fashion than that, with the full light of God's providence shining upon it. Jesus was an idealist. He set before men a shining height; He meant them to climb it. But there was no royal road to its summit. He set the fair ideal before men's eyes; then He breathed into their spirits that life by which the ideal was to be realised. God's ideals cannot be reached in a day, nor a year, nay, nor in one hundred years.

All things are under one law—growth. They pass from stage to stage, and it is only at the end that God's purpose is fulfilled.

Jesus was always teaching that. It is the point of every parable, the moral of every tale. Men who followed Him, whom He had taught to look at the

world through His eyes, were impatient. His constant advice was "Wait!" He never struck the vices of His age, never singled out the glaring vices of His time.

There was slavery. He never said a word against it. Yet there the horror was. Why was He silent? Because the time for its abolition was not yet come. As a matter of fact, the world then was better with slavery than it would have been had some great military leader attempted to crush the hateful system by a single blow.

There was the Roman Empire. It was far from being an ideal Government. He never spoke against it. Why? It was better than none. Without it the world had been chaos. Paul saw that, for he said: "The powers that be are ordained of God."

There was the Roman army, the instrument, often, of brutal tyranny. Jesus never said a word. Why? Because it was better than no army. Without it Society would have been impossible. The bad would have held the good at their mercy.

And we must ever remember that our Master came on earth to do one thing—"I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!" "Straitened!"

He deliberately narrowed His life that the flow through its channel might be more intense. "He pleased not Himself." He said nothing of such things as art, or music, or education. Yet where His spirit has entered the life of a people it has fostered all these.

Patriotism? He never mentioned it. The State and its policies never seemed to interest Him.

And the Church—rarely did He say anything of that. He certainly gave no direction as to its government or creed; but it was His Spirit that breathed into that man-made institution and gave it life.

Fact was, Jesus was a teacher of heart-life. He was not an officer of the State. He could not use force. Had He attempted to there would have been an end to His career at once.

The State has the right to use force. But Jesus never referred to that. It was outside His province.

"To this end was I born," He said; "and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth."

Jesus dealt with the individual when He discoursed on long-suffering and forgiveness and love. The law for you and for me and all Christians is the golden rule.

And what about States? Is the law for the individual the law for the State? I should say so.

Then what about war? *Must not love sometimes use force?* Non-resistance may be criminal, sometimes. Is a nation to go unarmed and suffer injustice? Jesus never even discussed that.

And we are left to the revelation God has given us in our own reason, in the history of bygone generations, and the whole trend of Christian opinion as guided by the New Testament. It is an ideal world in which there is to be no war. The vision of the Bible impresses that. How about a world that is not ideal? Is it ever right to use force? Let us see. Is it right to secure law and order in London? What makes London safe? I have heard a man say "Schools and Churches." That is not all, however. They help but, unaided, they are insufficient. We are dependent upon them—Schools and Churches; they certainly help to keep our London sweet. What else is requisite? Why, surely, Public Opinion and the Police! We could not live in London if it were not for the police. There are desperadoes living in London who have come from the ends of the earth. They would kill you, if they dared,

as readily as they would kill a fly. Take away civil government, and where would be your safety to-morrow? Then if we need police in the city, we need them in the State. For the State, as surely as the city, has the right of self-defence. Our jails are not libels upon our civilisation. Our property must not be at the mercy of frenzied mobs. And so with the nation. The frontiers must be guarded. In other words, the nation must have police; only we don't call them police, we call them regulars and territorials. You will most certainly lock your doors to-night. Should not a nation? Its harbours are its doors, and a fort is nothing but a lock. Now, if a nation must protect itself on land, is it not equally bound to protect itself on sea? Many Englishmen spend their lives on the sea. The Government must see to their security. Regent Street does not terminate with Oxford Circus or with Piccadilly. "Its lines are gone out to the ends of the earth." If it is right to have policemen on Regent Street, it is right to have them on the water as far as Yokohama and Hong Kong.

If the nation has a right to arm itself, it has a right to use its arms when self-defence demands it. In other words, a nation has a right to engage in war. If a nation has no right to strike another nation which persists in trampling upon human rights, and defying the eternal principles of justice, then the State has no right to quell a band of rioters in the act of destroying property and life, and the city police-force has no right to put down a mob in the streets. The principle is the same. And these institutions must not be regarded as the negation of Christianity—they must rather be looked upon as the instruments in the hands of Society by which the principles of Jesus are given a chance. A libel on our Christian civilisation they are not. They

are, rather, a confession of good sense, and also a frank acknowledgment that ours is an imperfect world in which the race has not yet reached its growth.

Let defence, not defiance, be our motto, and we may go forward, even through the fire of war, with the holy vision before us, doing everything humanly possible to hasten the day of the Prince of Peace, for, of a surety, "the cradle-song of Christ was never sung in vain."

Hymn sung at close of Service.

God bless our native land:
Her strength and glory stand
Ever in Thee!
Her faith and laws be pure,
Her throne and hearths secure;
And let her name endure—
Home of the free.

God guard our sea-girt land,
And save by Thy right hand
From all her foes;
The reign of peace prolong,
Till freedom's rising song
Loud tells the end of wrong
And nature's throes!

God smile upon our land,
And countless as the sand
Her blessings be!
Arise, O Lord, Most High!
And call her children nigh,
Till heart and voice reply—
Glory to Thee. Amen.

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